



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Apps, J. (2017) 5 school newsletter mistakes you're probably making. Teach Primary, 11 (3). pp. 62-63.

Link to official URL (if available):

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



5 school newsletter MISTAKES you're probably making

Incomprehensible jargon, mysterious requests for 'three-pronged sticks' – here's what to avoid if you want to get your message across

JOANNA APPS

School newsletters tell you a lot about the relationships schools have with families. They can be empathetic or authoritarian, chatty or direct. They can inform and engage parents or confuse and distance them. From time to time they can be perfect pieces of storytelling about the peculiar challenges of school life, like this example:

We have had a number of issues with food being stuffed into the overflow of the boys' toilets. On previous occasions the food has not been traceable. However, last Thursday a large Cornish pasty wrapped in tin foil caused flooding in the boys' toilets. Please let us know if this was part of your son's lunch box. Thank you.

While there is huge interest in how schools can better engage parents in their children's learning, newsletters have been largely overlooked as part of this process. But they play an important role in school-home relations. On your website they are part of your public image and give prospective parents a view of what your school is like. And in children's homes they can stick around for a long time on fridges and noticeboards.

After looking at newsletters from primary schools across the UK, it is clear that some schools can fall into a rut in the way they communicate with parents. Here

are five common mistakes and some ideas on how to fix them, with examples from real primary school newsletters.

1 Unnecessary jargon

Y6 are having an extra PSHE session this week after their SATs in the KS2 classrooms.

Most professions are full of acronyms and we can sometimes forget that the terms that we use are not always clear to others. Schools are no exception. My research found these types of terms used in 60% of primary school newsletters. It is always helpful to reduce the amount of acronyms you use or provide a glossary. This is important to ensure that the message you want to convey is understood by all parents, including those with English as an additional language and those with lower levels of literacy.

2 Complex language

Like using too much jargon, longer words and more complex sentence structures also affect how readable your newsletters are. In my research I found primary school newsletters required an average reading age of 12-13 years, with some as high as 13-15 years. If you want text to be readable to a wide audience, the recommended reading age level is 11, or

a reading age of eight if you want it to be readable to a 'universal' audience. Ask older children in your school to read through a newsletter before it goes out. They can also be involved in the writing process.

3 Authoritarian tone

There are undoubtedly times when the behaviour of some parents in and around school is of serious concern, such as in the newsletter item below:

Some parents are driving in a hazardous way around the roads adjacent to the school. Some drivers, who are themselves parents, appear to completely disregard other families and children in their haste and in the manner of their driving. Parking continues to be a bone of contention and there is still a regular minority of parents who insist upon parking on the zig-zag lines which is both selfish and dangerous. May I remind you that there should be NO PARKING on this road!

The overall tone of this newsletter item is highly emotional and authoritarian. It clearly shows how frustrated the school is with the situation. However, this is not necessarily a good thing to communicate to all parents. It risks undermining the



school's authority rather than reinforcing it, because it emphasises a lack of control and composure. Sometimes these items sit next to welcoming and friendly invitations to parents to come into school for shows and events. This could undermine how these invitations are viewed by parents. Think about whether your newsletter is consistent in tone. If you do need to give out stronger messages about parking or similar matters, consider more direct approaches to the parents concerned.

Think carefully about the use of strong authoritarian signs or symbols like road hazard signs, red no parking signs or block capitals. In the example below, the text appeals to parents to help their child's

transition to reception class. However, the addition of the hazard sign changes this communication and sends an underlying message that parents are a 'hazard' and unwelcome in the classroom.

4. Unclear requests

When you want parents to do something at home or bring something in, it helps to tell them exactly what you want them to do and why. Sometimes requests in newsletters can be a little obscure, like this mysterious item:

Y1 are getting creative. For 13th December please could your child bring a named shoebox (no lid) and a three-pronged stick.

Unless it is imperative to keep it a secret, letting parents know what is happening will make it more likely that they will comply with your requests. This is especially important when it comes to home learning. Research shows that parents want specific information on how to support their children and why it is important. The following example is more effective than a reminder simply saying, 'Read to your child regularly'.

Children who read at home regularly make the most progress. Little and often is the best approach. Please hear your child read every day for at least ten minutes, following the words with your finger as they read. They will reap the benefits!

5 Negative or impersonal tone

Most schools already use a positive tone in some or all parts of their newsletters and this is a good style to try to increase. Newsletters thanking parents for their support, regularly naming individual children's good behaviour and achievements build a sense of school community and partnership with parents. A quick scan of your newsletter to see how many times words like 'thank', 'celebrate', 'exciting', 'invite' and 'pleased' come up in relation to the number of examples of 'stop', 'must' and 'should not' gives you a good idea of how you're doing on this front. **TP**

Joanna Apps is a senior lecturer at the Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities at Canterbury Christ Church University. Subscribe to her twice-yearly parental engagement newsletter by emailing pern@canterbury.ac.uk.



Please help your child settle in by leaving them at the classroom door. Thank you.